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ABSTRACT

Although children who live in environments of violence and poverty are frequently the subjects of psychoanalysis, much less attention is given to the fears and anxieties of children from more fortunate families. In the case of one San Francisco Bay Area school, the two head teachers in the kindergarten class were going to be absent for two non-consecutive weeks, following winter break, to interview prospective students for the upcoming school year. The teachers explained to the students what they would be doing during the upcoming week and that the assistant teachers would be in charge of the classroom. Despite the careful planning and preparation, the children complained about the disruption in their routines while the teachers were absent. The assistant teachers, who previously had been loved and appreciated, became the objects of dislike and disrespect. Children with a stable capacity for verbal negotiation began to revert to physical outbursts and temper tantrums. An interview with the children revealed an array of stories about being "bribed" with candy and treats by baby-sitters as comfort while their parents were away for the evening or a vacation. The teachers' leaving was seen as punishment for their oedipal strivings and successes. Because the teachers were leaving to interview prospective students, i.e., replacements, the conflicts became intensified and the affects difficult to manage. (BF)

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I Don't Feel Safe When You're Gone: Transference Manifestations in a Kindergarten Class

Because we have been asked to consider the place of psychoanalysis in the current socio-cultural context you have heard and will hear a great deal about children who face the misfortunes of poverty, violence, abandonment, drug abuse, and on goes the list that we know all too well. The kindergarten children you are about to meet live in a much different world. The are not poor; in their neighborhoods, violence in a rarity; some may suffer from emotional neglect, but not from physical neglect or abandonment; if their parents abuse drugs, it does not take food off the table and is a well-managed secret. I believe that it is only because these children are free from externally imposed hardships that the story they created was possible. For example, it is hard to imagine the same story emerging from a group made up largely of foster children or children being raised by relatives because their parents were in jail, on the streets, or otherwise unavailable. Could children who face the realities of poverty or whose walk to school is endangered by gunfire tell the same tale? I think not. So for a few moments let us turn from world of external hardships to the world of internal conflict.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Dr. Joseph Afterman to the conceptualization and preparation of this work.

Private elementary schools in the United States face a perennial problem when trying to interview prospective kindergarten students in a situation that allows teachers to assess adequately the children's readiness and appropriateness for their school, provides a relatively anxiety-free atmosphere for the incoming children, and creates the least disruption for the present kindergarten class. A variety of plans have been tried, ranging from individual interviews with each applicant, to observations of small groups of prospective students on weekends or after regular school hours, to observations of the applicants in their nursery schools.

One San Francisco Bay Area school had tried a variety of these formats with varying success. Recently, a different plan, which allowed the two head kindergarten teachers and administrative staff extensive observations of each applicant in a small group, was tried. Though it required the two head teachers to absent themselves from their kindergarten classes for two non-consecutive weeks, everyone seemed to feel that the information this process provided was enough improved to justify the disruption to the current kindergartners.

So, as they had the previous year, shortly after the winter break, the kindergarten teachers announced to their classes that they would be out of the classroom the following week. They explained that they would be meeting with children who might be kindergartners the following year. While the youngsters looked around the room, apparently wondering how

there would be room for these new kids, the teachers carefully reassured them that their assistant teachers, whom the children had known and worked with since the beginning of the year, would be in charge. The children were told about the temporary assistants for the week. Again, these were people familiar to the children, either substitute teachers or teachers who supervise playground and after-school activities.

The week of preparation proceeded smoothly as the children eagerly began work on a new unit of study which focused on individual growth and development. The children brought in pictures of themselves as babies and toddlers. They talked about how they had grown in size and ability over the last 5 or 6 years and began to think about what adventures and accomplishments lay ahead. Naturally, they talked about having been pre-schoolers, then kindergartners, and about their anticipation of becoming first-graders. One teacher commented that it is at this time of year that the kindergartners always begin to feel themselves as truly part of the school community, with the consequent feeling of insult at having to remain in kindergarten when they feel quite mature enough for first grade.

During this week the teachers conscientiously reminded their classes of the upcoming separation and their plans to join the children for lunch each day. They engaged them in discussions about the previous year, when they had been kindergarten applicants. Clearly, the teachers and

administrators recognized the importance of the impending separation and devoted an enormous amount of thoughtfulness to preparing the children. This then was the context in which the first of the two planned one-week absences occurred.

Despite their considerable and best efforts, the week did not go smoothly. Though there was almost no variation in the order or content of their days, the children complained about disruption in their routines. The assistant teachers, who previously had been loved and appreciated, were the object of dislike and disrespect. They "just didn't do things right." Children with a stable capacity for verbal negotiation began to revert to physical outbursts and temper tantrums. These soon-to-be-first-graders were showing remarkably little maturity in the face of a seemingly reasonable and anticipated stress.

At the end of this week I had occasion to hear about the unexpected outbursts, regression, and general unhappiness that had characterized the preceding days. Since neither teachers, nor students, nor parents were looking forward to a repeat of the previous week, it seemed essential to account for the children's behavior, to understand why the children were so distressed by this event. One of the kindergarten teachers and I began to sift through recent events and the children's behavior for clues. Clearly, one could not cite lack of care, inadequate preparation, or unsatisfactory

substitutes. Thus, we turned from educational to psychological factors for an explanation.

With a tentative hypothesis in mind, we proposed some additions to the previous preparations. In large measure, these stemmed from our appreciation of the regression that the children had undergone and our recognition that regression had to be taken into account if the children were to be helped to manage adequately the feelings engendered by their teacher's absence.

Since their thinking had obviously become much more concrete under the stress, we suggested insuring that there were many pictures of the teachers *with their students* available in a book or on bulletin boards. It seemed important that the teachers, as well as having lunch with the children, be in the classrooms in the morning to greet their current students so that they could know for sure that their teachers were in the building. We considered using the blackboards for daily notes to and from the absent teachers. Another idea for helping to remind the children that their teacher's absence was temporary, was to begin a special project in the week preceding the separation with plans for completing it upon the teacher's return. In appreciation of the extent of the regression, the teacher commented, "We have to all the things we did at the beginning of the year!"

In addition, I offered to meet with one of the kindergarten classes during the week prior to the second week of interviews. My idea at the time was to think with the

children about how they might help themselves during the impending separation. While I had in mind that the appropriate intervention would be the shoring up fragile ego functions in the face of strong affects, the children had a much clearer sense of what they needed. Their resistance to supportive measures was equaled only by the persistence of their demands to be heard.

I arrived at school with the children and observed and chatted with them as they settled into their usual morning routines. During "morning meeting," I was introduced as someone whose job it is to talk to children and adults about their feelings. I added that one thing I try to do in my office is help people figure out things when they're feeling bad or confused. I also told the children that I knew that during the week their teacher had been absent to interview kindergartners it had been hard for some of them. I wondered whether we might be able to think together about how to make things go better the next week, when she would again be absent for the same reason.

One little girl eagerly commented that when parents go away they have a baby-sitter. I noted that they, too, would have someone when their teacher was gone. Other children offered that baby-sitters were supposed to make you feel better when your parents were gone. The first child suggested that sometimes baby-sitters give you candy because they know you're sad and they want to make you feel better.

This seemingly innocuous comment opened the way for a steady outpouring of gradually regressive fears about the dangers children face in the absence of protective parents. First children talked about their routine experiences with baby-sitters when parents were gone for short periods, out for an evening, for example. At this point the children mentioned being offered candy, dessert, or sweetened cereals by their baby-sitters. Being able to stay up past bedtime was mentioned in passing as a "bribe" baby-sitters sometimes offer.

One child then stated that his parents had gone on a trip to Europe for two weeks. Another chimed in about the time her mother had unexpectedly been whisked to the hospital to deliver her baby brother; she had been taken to her aunt's house after school instead of going home as she had expected. This prompted another child to offer that he too had a baby brother and had been left with a baby-sitter for a long time when the brother was born.

The children's apparently reality-based stories of being separated from their parents were increasingly interspersed with tales of having been wooed by baby-sitters into misbehavior. The tales grew taller with each teller. One child claimed to have been allowed to stay up until 9 o'clock. Soon another said that she had stayed up until midnight. Later another announced that he had gone bed at 10 but then gotten up and stayed up until 2 a.m.

Naturally, the anxiety level in the room intensified by the minute. The volume rose, squirms increased, and the capacity to wait one's turn decreased markedly. Though no fights broke out, children were gently and not so gently pushing at each other, either infringing upon others or complaining about infringements into their territory.

Finally, one little boy announced that while his parents were away he had walked into the room where his baby sister was playing on the floor and "kicked her in the head." Both from his affect and his subsequent comments it was clear, at least to him, that this was something that couldn't be helped; though it caused him great anxiety, it was something he "just did." Rather like the mountain that has to be climbed because it there; there was a head that had to be kicked, just because it was there.

The telling of this tale led to an understandable and only barely controlled pandemonium. The children seemed exhausted and relieved to be escorted outdoors for morning recess. On the way to the playground the teachers voiced their surprise at both the content and intensity of the children's comments. The consultation had offered them a rare and valuable opportunity to observe, without responsibility for comment or control, the affects and ideas of their young charges. The remainder of the week proceeded smoothly, as had the earlier week preceding the teachers' absence.

However, unlike their response to the previous separation, when the children next faced the absence of their teachers, they responded well to the preparations that had been made for them. They seemed comforted and pleased by the offerings of their substitute "head" teachers and were generally kind and helpful to the substitute "assistant" teachers. Their capacity for verbalization stabilized and the incidents of loss of impulse control markedly decreased. In general, they made use of the care that had been taken on their behalf and, though they missed their teachers, they used the substitutes to maintain a capacity for symbolic thought and thus managed the affective experiences in more mature and growth-promoting ways.

While one could argue that the second week of the teachers' absences went more smoothly because it was now a familiar experience, I believe that it is only with an understanding of unconscious processes and the ubiquitous nature of transference that the intensity and magnitude of these children's reactions can be understood. After all, prior to their first absence the teachers had done everything "right," both as educators and as adults interested in protecting and supporting the budding ego-strengths of children in their charge. They had prepared the children, they had arranged for familiar and good substitute care, they had structured their day to allow time to visit the children, and they had planned the separations for a time when the

children were feeling secure about their routines and their place in the school. Accordingly, the children should have managed the separation as well the first week as they did the second.

However, from the viewpoint of these oedipal-aged children all the "right" things could not assuage the intensity of the feelings engendered by the loss, albeit temporary, of their teachers. Having weathered the anxiety-filled first half of the school year, they were just beginning to enjoy feeling more grown up. They were now "big kids" who knew their way around the school; they could get to a bathroom when necessary and could navigate their way from one end of the building to the other. The faces of other teachers and older children were increasingly familiar. Fire and earthquake drills weren't so scary. They could begin to feel secure in their knowledge of school routines and the ability to anticipate the events of the week.

As it happened, just at this point the teachers introduced a new unit on human development. Under ordinary circumstances the regressive wishes activated by this material would have been offset by the children's growing pleasure in and appreciation of their increasing maturity. However, because the teachers simultaneously informed the children that they would be away, I believe they unwittingly became players in the children's unconscious oedipal fantasies in which the children, to a greater or lesser

extent, interpreted the teachers' leaving as punishment for their oedipal strivings and successes.

It was precisely because they were leaving to interview prospective students, i.e., replacements, that the conflicts become so intensified and the affects so difficult to manage. Had the teachers been absent for other reasons, to attend a conference or to visit relatives, for example, I believe the reactions of their students would have been significantly milder, though not without anxiety. But the confluence of factors, most important that their teachers' attention would be devoted to "those babies," led the children to respond as if the teachers were abandoning them in response to their wishes to move ahead. And they responded as we would expect, by regressing to the behavioral equivalent of their feared and hated rivals.

We know that the unconscious fantasy that the family remains unchanged even as the child grows persists throughout childhood and perhaps into adulthood, giving rise, for example, to the college student's surprise at discovering on the first visit home that the house was not exactly as remembered, along with outrage if there has been the least alteration in the room left behind. In the same way, while these kindergarten children were consciously looking forward to first grade, it was with the unconscious expectation that everything in kindergarten would be the same. In other words, they expected to occupy the same position of supremacy in the

hearts and minds of their beloved teachers, despite their move to a new classroom. They simply had not yet anticipated that they would be replaced. Thus, the early separation from the teachers prompted a premature mourning and led to unexpected regression and feelings of abandonment.

The transference implications of the children's behavior was quickly confirmed during my discussion with them, in which the first and virtually all subsequent comments were about parents, rather than teachers. In reviewing the process of the discussion, which lasted approximately 20 minutes, there is an interesting alternation and progression in the material. The seductiveness of infancy and oral gratification hold one valance point while the equally forbidden pleasures of peeking into the adult world of the night capture the opposite pole. Interspersed are memories and fears of abandonment. Eventually, aggressive impulses surface in the little boy's announcement of having kicked his baby sister.

Though the teacher commented that this was typical of the role this child played in the group dynamics, I believe his comment in part a reflected the children's responses to conscious memories of parental abandonment and the consequent feelings of rage which were stirred up by their teacher's absence. Of greater importance, his accent on the aggressive dangers which might beset children who are left by parents successfully diverted the discussion away from the more anxiety-provoking sexual material that was beginning to

predominate By (unconsciously) moving the discussion into the arena of aggression and sibling rivalry he successfully re invoked the image of the protective adult, be it parent or teacher, who will reprimand and control misbehavior, both aggressive *and* sexual. Thus aggression was introduced as a regressive defense against the fears engendered by oedipal strivings.

Thus I believe that this 20-minute discussion essentially recapitulated the events of the previous weeks. The children returned from the winter holidays full of energy, pride, and oedipal glory. Unlike their earlier entry into school following the summer holidays, they no longer felt themselves the babies. However, as they both longed for and feared, their wishes to be grown up were taken more seriously than they had consciously intended, and, to their way of thinking, the teachers not only rejected their loving maturity, but turned away from them to search for replacements. They could not create the babies their teachers so obviously desired, nor could they any longer be babies for them, for to do so would require relinquishing a growing sense of self-esteem and movement toward latency. They responded by rejecting the substitute teachers, not only, I believe, as inadequate caretakers, but also as unsuitable love objects. Their regression was both a demand for attention and the expressed rage of lovers whose offers of undying devotion had been spurned.

A ubiquitous part of development is the wish that as we grow and change the world will simultaneously hold constant and alter to accommodate our changes. Clearly this was true for this group of young children whose ambivalent wishes were intensified by a confluence of events that occurred at a moment of particular developmental vulnerability. In retrospect, we might have been able to predict that these events, taken together, would cause considerable distress for the children and to make modifications accordingly. However, it is not always possible or even advisable to do so. For example, the school could return to Saturday interviews for prospective kindergartners, but, in addition to diminishing the quality of the application process for teachers and children alike, it might unwittingly prolong the kindergarten children's denial that there will be real consequences to their growth, learning, and acquisition of skills. Next year, the unit on infancy might be delayed until the kindergarten interviews have passed. If so, the children's cognitive assimilation of the material might be easier, yet without the heightened affective charge the educational material might be less rich. And, while the teachers, both those leaving the classroom and those left behind, might have more pleasant weeks, they would risk missing the vividness, complexity, and intensity of the children's feelings for and about them.

While, as clinicians, we are well aware of the ubiquitous nature of transference relationships, particularly

in the lives of young children, we are not always in the position to observe their power outside the consulting room. This brief consultation in a kindergarten classroom highlighted the essential role of the parent-child transference in oedipal children's relationships to their teachers. When the school situation too closely approximated the children's unconscious fantasies of oedipal victory, the children were unable to play and therefore unable to learn. Instead they regressed in a defensive and ill-fated attempt to recapture the pre-oedipal love of the teachers they were about to leave behind in their strivings toward greater maturity and the ever-widening world of school.